



The **STATE**
of **CIVIC LIFE**

Tuesday, May 19, 7:30 AM - 6:30 PM
Nebraska Innovation Campus

The **STATE** of **CIVIC LIFE**



Morning Schedule



7:30 AM – 8:45 AM

- Registration & Check-In, *2nd Floor*
- Networking & Coffee, *The Mill Coffee & Bistro*

9:00 AM – 9:15 AM

- Welcome & Opening Remarks, *Auditorium (2nd Floor)*

Civic Health

9:30 AM – 10:30 AM

Leadership in the Public
Arena: Why It's Difficult

- *Breakout Room A,
1st Floor*

10:45 AM – 11:45 AM

Setting Yourself Up for
Success After Legislative
Session

- *Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor*

Civic Education

9:30 AM – 10:30 AM

Rebuilding the On-Ramp:
Countering
Disenfranchisement Among
Naturalized Nebraskans

- *Auditorium, 2nd Floor*

10:45 AM – 11:45 AM

Reconnecting Generations:
Engaging Young People in
Legacy Civil Rights
Organizations to Build
Collective Civic Power

- *Breakout Room A,
1st Floor*

Civic Action

9:30 AM – 10:30 AM

Networking

- *Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor*

10:45 AM – 11:45 AM

Local Matters: Making a
Difference with Strong
Towns

- *Auditorium, 2nd Floor*

11:45 AM – 12:45 PM

- Lunch, *Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor*

12:15 PM – 12:45 PM

- Civic Health Index, *Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor*

The STATE of CIVIC LIFE



Afternoon Schedule



1:00 – 2:00 PM

- Keynote: Why Civic Health Matters, *Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor*

Civic Health

2:15 PM – 3:15 PM

Prosper Lincoln: A Decade of Community-Based Solutions

- *Auditorium, 2nd Floor*

3:30 PM – 4:30 PM

Quiet Space

- *Auditorium, 2nd Floor*

Civic Education

2:15 PM – 3:15 PM

“Learners to Leaders”:
Youth Civic Education and the Entrepreneurial Mindset

- *Breakout Room A, 1st Floor*

3:30 PM – 4:30 PM

From Service to Purpose:
Helping Students See Civic Engagement as a Path Forward

- *Breakout Room A, 1st Floor*

Civic Action

2:15 PM – 3:15 PM

Arts Advocacy: A Wellness Program, Not an Emergency Room Visit

- *Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor*

3:30 PM – 4:30 PM

Engaging Young Nebraskans in Civics

- *Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor*

4:30 PM – 5:00 PM • Bingo & Closing, *Auditorium, 2nd Floor*

5:00 PM – 6:30 PM • Networking & Happy Hour, *The Barred Owl*



Nebraska's Civic Health

ABOUT THE CIVIC HEALTH INDEX

Civic health refers to how we assess our connection to one another and our shared public life. It reflects how engaged we are with our communities, whether at city hall or on a front porch, in a voting booth, or at a neighborhood gathering. It measures how we show up for each other, how we work together to solve common problems, and how well our institutions reflect the people they serve.

This report takes a closer look at how Nebraskans are doing across four key dimensions of civic health:

- » **Civic Trust:** How much people trust their neighbors, communities, and institutions like government, schools, and businesses.
- » **Civic Access:** Whether people can participate fully in civic life, through broadband, transportation, local news, and inclusive public spaces.
- » **Civic Action:** The ways people show up — by voting, volunteering, joining groups, or working with neighbors to make a difference.
- » **Civic Knowledge:** How informed people are about the world around them — including news, civic education, and the democratic process.

This report would not be possible without our partners' dedication, vision and collaboration. We are grateful for our partners at Nebraska Community Foundation, Nebraska Extension, The Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska Omaha, The University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, and National Conference on Citizenship.



Why Civic Health Matters

Keynote: 1:00- 2:00 PM, Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor

Matt Leighninger is the Vice President of the National Civic League, and directs the League's Center for Democracy Innovation. The National Civic League was founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt and Louis Brandeis; it maintains the Model City Charter, organizes the All-America City Awards, and supports communities in their work to renovate local democracy.

Matt leads the Center's work in strengthening civic infrastructure, using technology to scale engagement, and measuring the quality of participation and democracy.

Over the last 30 years, Matt has worked with democracy-building efforts in over 100 communities in 41 states. Matt's first book, ***The Next Form of Democracy***, is a firsthand account of the wave of democratic innovation that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. His second, ***Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy***, with Tina Nabatchi, is a guide and textbook that surveys the role and potential of democratic engagement.

The Center is currently leading two major projects: Better Public Meetings, which is helping communities change the typical (broken) format of their official interactions with residents; and the **Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map**, a comprehensive dataset and visualization of all the organizations in America that are working to improve democracy.



About Today's Sessions

Civic Health Track

This track illuminates the conditions that strengthen communities and democratic life, while exploring data, trends, and lived experiences that shape civic well-being.

Leadership in the Public Arena: Why It's Difficult

Racquel Thiesen, Kansas Leadership Center
9:30 - 10:30 AM, Breakout Room A, 1st Floor

This session will help participants see ways forward when work in the public arena is most challenging. It will highlight the importance of understanding process challenges and learning what to consider when decisions must be made, and competing values are at play. The work that people with authority do is not the same as exercising leadership. This session will distinguish that difference and give participants new ways of thinking about how to deploy themselves depending on the need.

Setting Yourself Up for Success After Legislative Session

Guadalupe Esquivel & Hannah Young, Nebraska Civic Engagement Table
10:45 - 11:45 AM, Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor

Now that the legislative session is over, what can your organization do now to set yourself up for success next January? We will share how to make a public policy agenda, interact with Senators and Candidates in the interim, and explore elements of communications planning and storytelling strategies that will have you ready to go for the 2027 Legislative Session! You will come away with the start of a work plan and ideas to propel your policy efforts. This session is geared for organizations and people who are interested in being more involved in the legislature but might not know where to start.

Prosper Lincoln: A Decade of Community-Based Solutions

Alexandria Labenz, Prosper Lincoln; Anne Brandt, Lincoln Littles & Amanda Barker, Lincoln Community Foundation

2:15 - 3:15 PM, Auditorium, 2nd Floor

This session will offer participants the chance to explore the origin of the Lincoln Vital Signs data report and how it led to the creation of Prosper Lincoln, a community-based initiative to solve complex local challenges. Led by the Lincoln Community Foundation and key partners since 2016, the Prosper Lincoln initiative has been a catalyst for community action and investment in strong neighborhoods, early childhood supports, affordable housing, workforce development, and more. The first portion of the session will highlight the community data that informs Prosper Lincoln, along with a resource and process overview to produce Lincoln Vital Signs. The second portion of the session will offer specific models for civic action, specifically surrounding affordable housing, early childhood, and social connectedness and economic mobility.

Civic Education Track

This track explores how we can prepare all people to participate meaningfully in democracy, including formal and informal pathways for cultivating civic knowledge, skills, and confidence.

Rebuilding the On-Ramp: Countering Disenfranchisement Among Naturalized Nebraskans

Lisa Guill, Lanetta (PoePoe) Edison-Soe, Nyabuoy Chan, Rebecca Reinhardt & Thuy Ngoc Ho, Asian Community & Cultural Center

9:30 - 10:30 AM, Auditorium, 2nd Floor

Taking the naturalization oath gives new citizens the legal right to vote—but actually being able to use that right is becoming harder. In 2025, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services ended nonpartisan voter registration help at naturalization ceremonies, removing a key first step into civic life for many new Americans. At the same time, Nebraska's strict photo ID law and ongoing federal debates around the SAVE Act have created confusing paperwork requirements that especially affect people born outside the U.S.

This panel brings together advocates from the Asian Community & Cultural Center who will share real stories from their work helping new citizens navigate voting systems, including common problems with documentation, cultural barriers, and practical barriers.

The session highlights practical approaches that are working, including education tactics, lived experience considerations, and community building work. Participants will take part in a short mapping activity to better understand and work around the confusing loops that often stop New Americans from casting a ballot. Grounded in lived experience, this session offers concrete strategies for nonprofit leaders and educators who want to help ensure that citizenship leads to meaningful civic participation in Nebraska.

Reconnecting Generations: Engaging Young People in Legacy Civil Rights Organizations to Build Collective Civic Power

Toni Monette, University of Nebraska at Omaha

10:45 - 11:45 AM, Breakout Room A, 1st Floor

What can today's civic leaders learn from organizations that have shaped democracy for more than a century? And how can we invite young people into that legacy in meaningful, power-building ways?

This session explores how national "legacy" civil rights and civic engagement organizations—like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—can serve as powerful platforms for developing the next generation of civic leaders. While many young people are deeply engaged in issue-based and digital activism, fewer are connected to institutions with long-standing strategies for collective action, policy influence, and leadership development.

Designed for nonprofit leaders, educators, students, volunteers, and community members, this conversation will examine how to bridge generational divides, modernize pathways to participation, and make legacy organizations relevant and accessible to emerging leaders. Participants will leave with practical ideas for cultivating youth leadership, strengthening civic trust, and building sustained collective power rooted in history, strategy, and shared purpose.

"Learners to Leaders": Youth Civic Education and the Entrepreneurial Mindset

Maria Rosario T. de Guzman, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

2:15 - 3:15 PM, Breakout Room A, 1st Floor

Entrepreneurship is often associated with business ventures and profit. However, an entrepreneurial mindset is fundamentally a way of thinking in ways that encourage creativity, problem solving, initiative, and the ability to identify opportunities for positive change.

Attendees will learn about “Learners-to-Leaders,” which is a suite of curricula designed to cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets for community engagement. Curricula include UpStarts, which engages high school students as consultants and problem solvers for local businesses and nonprofit organizations. Through real-world projects, youth learn to analyze problems, propose solutions, and contribute meaningfully to their local economies. Youth Arise targets middle school students, introducing them to civic learning and helping them explore ways they can contribute to and improve their communities. Finally, HandCrafted is designed for adults and brings immigrant and long-term residents together to collaborate on craft and artisanal ventures, using entrepreneurship to build relationships and strengthen community ties.

From Service to Purpose: Helping Students See Civic Engagement as a Path Forward

Anna Spethman, University of Nebraska at Omaha
3:30 - 4:30 PM, Breakout Room A, 1st Floor

Many students care about their communities but don't always see how civic engagement connects to their future careers or sense of purpose. This interactive workshop explores practical, grassroots strategies for helping students make those connections in ways that feel relevant and empowering. Drawing from work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, this session will share examples such as a Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) Day of Service that paired issue-based volunteer opportunities with a community leader panel on pathways to public service and purpose-driven work. It will also highlight a monthly civic engagement workshop series co-hosted with Civic Nebraska and Nebraska Table that centers discussion, lived experience, and actionable civic tools. Participants will take part in a hands-on “Make It Matter” exercise, working in small groups to reframe common volunteer experiences through a career-readiness lens—identifying transferable skills, leadership growth, and competencies students can confidently articulate on resumes and LinkedIn. Together, we will explore how storytelling, community partnerships, and simple recognition strategies like digital badges can increase buy-in and move engagement beyond one-time service toward sustained civic participation.

Civic Action Track

This track shows us how we can mobilize communities to participate, collaborate and take lead, while highlighting actionable strategies for driving engagement.

Local Matters: Making a Difference with Strong Towns

Brian Knudtson, Strong Towns Blair; Jacob Clark & Spencer Farley, Strong Towns Lincoln; Austin Van Velson & Abigail Araya, Strong Towns Omaha.

10:45 - 11:45 AM, Auditorium, 2nd Floor

As state- and federal-level policy makes headlines, our daily lives are shaped in large part by decisions made in our own backyards. Local governments influence the strength of our economies, the availability of affordable housing, and who can travel safely to work and school. By engaging at the local level, we all have an opportunity to make our communities more livable and inviting for everyone who calls them home. What does meaningful engagement look like, and how can we each take action to better support our neighbors?

This panel shares stories and lessons from advocates in Blair, Lincoln, and Omaha who've advanced citizen-led change through the Strong Towns movement. If you want to explore methods to make an impact in your city or town – from hosting local conversations on housing policy to building and installing benches at neighborhood bus stops to literally painting walkways on streets – this is the session for you!

Arts Advocacy: A Wellness Program, Not an Emergency Room Visit

Dr. Lance Nielson, Nebraskans for the Arts

2:15 - 3:15 PM, Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor

Advocacy thrives when we develop and sustain strong relationships, especially those forged with legislators and policymakers. And the heart of advocacy is our ability to tell stories. We do that as artists; we tell stories of the human condition and the world around us visually through canvas or clay, musically through sound, or acting on a stage. The relationship building through telling our stories forms the cornerstone of successful advocacy efforts, enabling us to articulate a clear message, influence policy decisions, and ultimately drive positive change for arts and arts education. This session will provide educators, art and cultural leaders, and supporters with various strategies and helpful tips for developing an effective advocacy plan for sustained success.

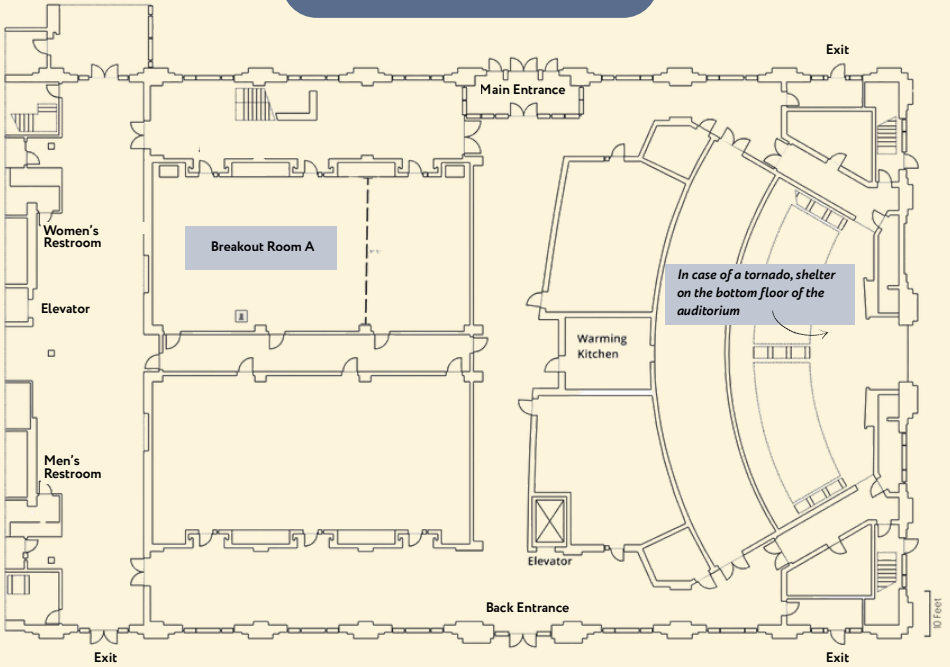
Engaging Young Nebraskans in Civics, Panel Discussion

Cleo Zagurski & Garrett Connelly, NEw Voices; Jonathan Rentería, Community Organizer; Gab Rima, Strongly Worded Letters & Urban Abbey; Melisa Becerra Gonzalez, Nebraska Civic Engagement Table

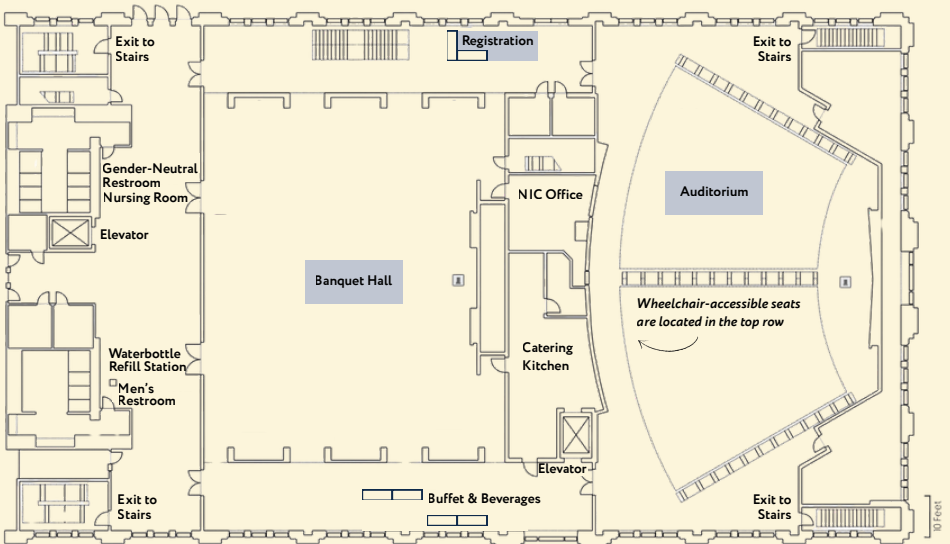
3:30 - 4:30 PM, Banquet Hall, 2nd Floor

The Engaging Young Nebraskans in Civics Panel, hosted by NEw Voices, brings together young advocates from across Nebraska to share firsthand perspectives on civic engagement strategies for young Nebraskans. Panelists will reflect on their experiences engaging in advocacy, organizing, policy work, and community leadership, and discuss the barriers that often limit youth participation. We will highlight barriers such as age-based gatekeeping, inaccessible systems, and a lack of meaningful opportunities to be heard. Through personal stories and practical examples, panelists will illustrate how civic engagement extends far beyond voting to include education, storytelling, relationship-building, and local action. This discussion will also highlight concrete strategies that organizations, institutions, and community leaders can use to make civic spaces more accessible and welcoming to young Nebraskans. Emphasis is placed on the importance of intergenerational partnership and on trusting young people as collaborators and decision-makers now, not just as future leaders.

First Floor



Second Floor





Thank You to Our Sponsors

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for our sponsors' generosity, collaboration, and
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